

# **Keeping the Faith**

**A Baccalaureate Sermon**

**By Olin A. Curtis, S.T.D., LL.D.**

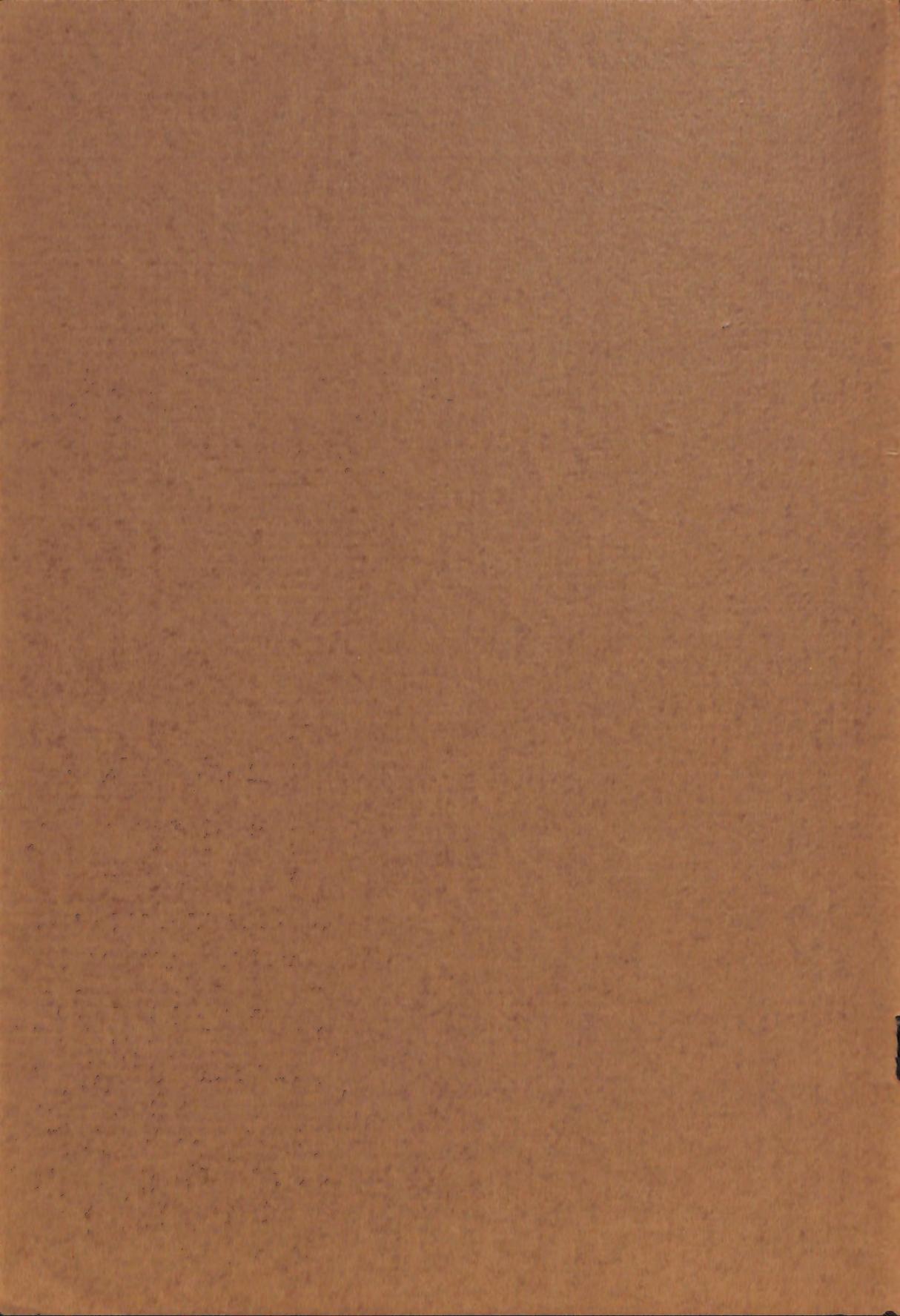
**Professor of Systematic Theology**

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**Preached in the Seminary Chapel**

**Madison, New Jersey**

**Sunday, May 17, 1914**



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## Keeping the Faith

II Timothy iv. 7: "*I have kept the Faith.*"

These triumphant words of the Apostle Paul instantly suggest my subject: *Keeping the Faith*.

Under this subject, I will try to do several things. I want to speak, first, of the spirit of faith; then, of the venture of faith; then, of the Christian Faith; and, then, at the end, I mean to urge you to keep both the spirit of faith and the Christian Faith.

### THE SPIRIT OF FAITH.

Behind every act of faith, there is the spirit of faith, without which the act itself would be impossible. This spirit of faith is an innate confidence, and this confidence is found, I am quite sure, even in creatures that never attain personality.

Here, in "Drew Forest," I once had the pleasure of watching, day by day, a Baltimore Oriole build its pensile nest. The entire performance was interesting, and in several ways. In the first place, the female oriole did all the work, and that was very interesting as a fact in Natural History. And, then, there was such an astonishing utilization of all sorts of accidental material—dried grasses, bits of bark, hair, feathers, plant-fibers, filaments of burlap, and even brightly colored twine and yarn; and all these curious odds and ends were ingeniously fashioned into a structure, architecturally as consummate as a Greek temple. And, then, there was such contagious audacity in hanging that dainty nest from the tip end of a swaying limb, up among the winds, perhaps forty feet above the ground. Why, as one looked at the swinging wonder, he could hardly keep from giving the aerial architect three ringing cheers!

But throughout this interesting performance, there was a feature of large philosophical significance, namely, the bird's unchanging trust—the way the bird constantly took for granted the reliability of its own instincts,—the way the bird ever had

confidence in things,—confidence in the buoyancy of the air, confidence in the nest-material, confidence in the elm tree, bole and branch.

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This same kind of inborn confidence we find always belonging to childhood. It will not answer to accept the teaching of Wordsworth as to the pre-existence of the infant's soul, but there is a sense in which a child does come from God "trailing clouds of glory." Because of our relation to the race, we are born sadly inorganic; but because of our relation to God, we are born with celestial proclivities. And one of these is a proclivity against skepticism. We have innate curiosity, but we have no innate tendency to doubt. *Naturally we are believers.*

Did you ever closely study a baby's first instinctive bearing toward his mother? In all the wide world, there is no study more intensely fascinating. What is a baby's first feeling—let us dare to say, What is a baby's first *opinion* of his mother? I know! It is that *she is reliable*. There may be, now and then, an amusing show of pioneer-investigation, especially as to the mother's face and hands, but this inquiry never means the beginning of doubt. The child's entire initial bearing can be expressed in one sentence: "I am not very well acquainted with you yet, but I am sure that you are to be trusted."

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Not only is this celestial confidence inbred, it is also *persistent*. Indeed, it has been known to remain, ready to appear at unexpected times, many years after a man has yielded to skepticism. In his *Journal Intime*, Amiel confesses that hidden under his doubt is "a child, a simple, sad, frank creature" who still believes.

Let us, then, take fast hold of this fact—to the sane individual, the spirit of skepticism is abnormal, just as abnormal as it would be for an infant to doubt his mother, or for a bird to question the integrity of a tree. Confidence is integrant in the basal plan of life. Every primary relation is rooted in the spirit of faith.

#### THE VENTURE OF FAITH.

A man, though, does not live on, as a bird lives on, by bare instinct. A man is an animal, but he is a peculiar kind of an animal. He is born with a *personal capacity*, capacity for self-knowledge and decision, capacity for responsible conduct. And so every innate instinct belonging to man must be *personally treated*. It has been said that "the most difficult thing a man ever does is to keep his childhood." As we grow; as we cast off our naive notions; as we make costly blunders; as we feel the checks of moral demand; as we discover that the world is full of clashing opinions; as we are deceived by those in whom we trusted; as, bewildered, we meet the mystery of strange events; as we experience change and loss and pain and sorrow—*we are tested*. And at the core of this testing, the question, which sooner or later we must answer, is just this: "Will you take sides with the spirit of faith, or will you take sides against it?"

I am now thinking of a certain woman, well known to me back in the years. Her boy, in whom were lodged all her dreams and ambitions, was drowned in Rock River. At first, she is not herself. She is dazed by the sudden blow. But we must give her time—and time—and time. Now she is herself, she has squarely faced the crisis, she has fought her fight through, and she has conquered. Here is what she says: "I do not understand this blow; when I try to reason about it, I land in nothing but confusion of mind; and I do not see how I can get along, I am so lonely, and the nights are so fearfully long. But I will believe that the world is rightly managed; and I will go back to work; and I will be useful; and I will help any person, anywhere, all I can."

This is what I mean by "the venture of faith." It is the tested person daring to be an optimist, daring to nourish the hidden child, daring to endorse the spirit of faith—that profoundly personal act which expresses the inherent majesty of manhood.

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Could I rightly allow to stand unmodified, what I have said concerning the venture of faith, it would be a great satisfaction; but, unfortunately, a very serious word of caution is required.

And while this word of caution should be expressed in all kindness, it must be expressed so firmly and so sharply that it cannot be easily forgotten.

Every worthy thing can be pushed beyond its normal boundary, and thus become unwholesome and even dangerous. Thus, liberty can be forced into the license of a freebooter; and love can be forced into a lawless and destructive passion. And just so faith can be forced into sheer presumption.

Some fifteen years ago, in a Western church, on a day in July, with the mercury above a hundred in the shade, I met a woman who, for such weather, was "all too ponderous." Her ample, florid face was dripping like a larch tree after a long summer rain. With more sympathy than originality, I said: "It *is* hot, isn't it?" To my swift discomfiture, she replied: "No, it is *not* hot, there is no such thing as heat."

There are to-day many sincere and religious people who would regard this denial of the heat as a venture of faith; but I regard it as a volitional caprice, a case of sheer presumption. Why so? *Because the personal will is allowed to disregard the integrity of empiric reality.* In spite of all opinion, there is practical reality, given in universal experience, and to this empiric reality we all must adjust our life. You may assert that there is no heat, but you will, if sane, keep your hand out of the flame. And it is this empiric reality which bounds normal faith on every side. *We have no right to juggle with a fact.* Faith is the apprehension of things unseen, but faith is not the apprehension of things untrue.

But not yet have we touched bottom. All these modern movements in arbitrary belief are, directly or indirectly, due to a crude mismanagement of the Idealistic Philosophy. In such a sermon as is suitable for this occasion, no adequate discussion of this philosophy is warranted; but I will take the time to throw out a few hints. Idealism can be utilized by the Christian thinker, but only after severe search, test and sifting. In this task, three points must be held ever in mind.

#### NO TAINT OF PANTHEISM CAN BE ALLOWED.

(1) There is a personal God who has willed the Universe into existence. In this universe, the Creator is not merely

immanent, He is also transcendent. God is above the world, and complete without the world. Men are dependent upon God, but they are not an organic part of God. Men, while dependent upon God, are self-decisive in personality, and so they are responsible under a standard of right and wrong.

(2) The world must be considered an actual reality outside of and separate from ourselves. We apprehend and interpret the world; but we do not create, we do not project, we do not posit the world.

(3) In apprehending and interpreting the world, the general reliability of our senses must be affirmed. The senses need to be developed and trained and corrected precisely as the mind needs to be developed and trained and corrected. But fundamentally, in our total experience, the senses are trustworthy. If we are to meet life with any confidence at all, we must begin by taking for granted the integrity of our entire human make-up.

#### THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.

Coming now to the Christian Faith, it would be interesting to study all the writings of St. Paul, and, by comparison, to find out exactly what the apostle had in mind when he wrote to Timothy,—“I have kept the faith.” But my aim to-day is to do something yet more important. I want to bring across the centuries the intrinsic Christian Faith, as I have myself traced it, not in the Pauline epistles alone, but in the entire New Testament; and I want to state this intrinsic Faith in living terms, and thus indicate what we, in our day, must keep, if we are to have the full apostolic relation to redemption through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In apprehending the Christian Religion, the first thing to lay hold of is that it is not a mere religion at all, but rather *a plan of rescue*. The main Christian purpose is not so much to reach and stimulate and express man’s religious nature as *to save him*, to rescue him from peril into the safety of eternal life, “that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish but have eternal life.” This is not a mere difference in words, it is a difference of the profoundest import.

There are, as I grasp the matter, five Christian peculiarities which are surely intrinsic, and in every one of the five, there is redempational significance. Let us, then, with great care, note these five intrinsic peculiarities.

#### FIRST, THE CHRISTIAN OPTIMISM.

In its general attitude toward life, the Christian Religion is a bold continuation of that spirit of faith which we remarked in children, and even in such creatures as birds. It, also, takes most important things for granted. It does not try to prove that there is no personal God, who is our Father; it does not try to prove that there is a Divine Providence under which the world is ordered in love and wisdom—all these things, and many more, are simply taken for granted. We, in our zeal, build systems, not only in doctrinal construction, but even in Theism and Theodicy; and these systems have value; but there are no systems in the New Testament.

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When we compare Christianity with, say, such a religion as Buddhism, this Christian optimism becomes strikingly evident. Indeed, the difference between the two religions is seen, not merely in their detailed doctrinal contrasts, but in their total atmospheric unlikeness. Buddhism has one atmosphere and Christianity has another and very dissimilar atmosphere. Buddhism is so hopeless, so infinitely depressing, and its appeal is to the battered and broken individual nature; while Christianity is so hopeful, so uplifting, and its appeal is to free and uncrushed personality.

To pass from Buddhism into the Christian Religion is like an experience I once had, on a tramp, in the country. I got lost in a stretch of boggy woods. Blundering about in the dark, dank tangle; my way often blocked by rotting logs; my feet heavy with clinging muck; and my lungs filled with miasmal air, I was tired enough to drop in my tracks,—when I saw, away off to one side, the soft light sifting through the thin edge of the woods. Urging myself on, soon I came out into a mountain-pasture, many acres of it, rising a bit toward the foot-

hills, and all of it open to wind and sun. The ground was firm beneath my feet; the grass was clean and not slimy, and, in every direction, there was a prodigality of meadow sweet and steeple bush in full bloom. It would not have been witless, had I borrowed the poet's words and cried out: One cannot "but be gay, in such a jocund company." But I was too nearly exhausted for any poetic exclamation, so I simply pre-empted a huge boulder, which had been there, waiting for me, some thousands of years; and then quietly I decided that never again would I enter that stretch of boggy woods.

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But this Christian optimism is profoundly peculiar in that it comes from the triumph of one kind of emphasis over another kind. In the Christian Religion, there is, first, a tremendous emphasis upon sin, upon the supremely selfish nature of sin, upon the everlasting antagonism between sin and God's holiness, and upon the dire and subtle and fascinating peril of sin to the sinner himself. Then, this emphasis upon sin is redemptively met by another Christian emphasis, an emphasis, upon the *Grace* of God.

As St. Paul has it in his great epistle to the Romans: "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."

#### SECOND, THE CHRISTIAN ATONEMENT.

There is a redemptional reason why the Divine Grace abounds to meet sin at every turn. This reason is that the Son of God took man's nature and place, and *died* for our sins. Because He died for us, we are become subjects of Grace and can be forgiven. Without any accretions of speculation, the Christian doctrine of the Atonement amounts to this: The death of our Lord makes it possible for God, with a motive of love and a method befitting holiness, to forgive a bad man when that man is ready, as a moral person, to be forgiven.

#### THIRD, THE CHRISTIAN REDEEMER.

There is a redemptional reason why the death of Christ has in it so much potency. This reason is that our Lord is the eternal

Son of God, belonging thus to the organic life of God. Verily our Redeemer is a part of God, and so necessarily a part of God that without Him, there could be no God whatsoever. Therefore, when the only inherent Son of God comes historically out of the inner life of God, and becomes man, and dies upon the Cross for our salvation, there is a veritable self-sacrifice on the part of God. Were Christ but a man, any lofty kind of a man—a prophet; a man representing God in a gracious economy of forgiveness; a man made to be a sufficient revelation of God; a man “having for us the religious value of God”—were Christ merely any one of these things—were Christ merely all of these things—then redemption would cost God nothing. In truth, any, any kind of a creature-Christ, God could will into existence as easily as He willed into existence that sycamore tree on our campus. For self-sacrificial import, we must have, not a Saviour who is a product of the Divine will, but a Saviour who is an eternal personal integrant of the Divine Being. Once give up the absolute and eternal Godhead of the person of our Redeemer, and Christianity drops its most distinctive and most intrinsic characteristic, and becomes nothing other than a religion, temporal and naturalistic. It is my intense conviction that the Christian Faith cannot be really kept without holding fast to the eternal deity in person, of our Lord Jesus Christ.

#### FOURTH, THE CHRISTAIN MIRACLE.

The miracles which are intrinsic in the Christian plan of salvation are three, the Virgin Birth, our Lord's Resurrection, and His Ascension. Taking these miracles separately, they have large redemptional significance; but taking them together, as connected features of one manifestation of God's redemptional bearing toward men, they have almost more significance. The cosmic order expresses the *Divine habit*, and the Christian miracles show that God cares more for men than He cares for the cosmic order, that He cares so much for men that, to accomplish their salvation, *He is willing to break His habit.*

As to the Virgin Birth of Christ, (the miracle which now is

creating so much discussion), my own experience is unlike the evident experience of the typical modern theologian. By this, I mean that with me this miracle is taking on a new and large Christian importance. Years ago, even ten years ago, the Virgin Birth did not appeal to me as our Lord's Resurrection appealed to me; but, in recent years, my Christian consciousness has been deepened and clarified, and I begin to see that the Virgin Birth is almost the most important Christian miracle, inasmuch as it alone protects our thinking and our feeling from all humanitarian taint. Our Saviour's humanity is not a thing of cosmic production; it is a real humanity, but it is supernaturally created for purely redemptional ends.

#### FIFTH, THE CHRISTIAN VENTURE OF FAITH.

In the Christian Religion, the venture of faith has three features:

(1) Like any other venture of faith, it is an act of the free person, bounded only by his loyalty to all empiric reality.

(2) Unlike many other ventures of faith, it is primarily a moral matter. It is a venture under conscience, a venture to secure moral peace, a venture to escape from sin. Thus, finally, the venture is both moral and redemptional.

(3) The object which saving faith seizes is double. It is, I know, quite the manner of the day to consider this object as Jesus; but such is not the case, at least such is not the normal case. The Christian object of saving faith is, to use St. Paul's phrase, "Jesus Christ and Him crucified." We may, for rhetorical convenience, use either part for the total; but we must see to it that, in our own ultimate thinking and feeling, we never separate Jesus Christ and His atonement for our sins. It is our Lord upon His Cross that furnishes an adequate object for our faith.

Alfred Noyes, in his poem, called "The Answer", has dramatically caught this double object of the Christian venture of faith:

"Did Joshua stay a sun that rolls  
    Around a central earth?—  
Our modern men have modern souls  
    And formulate their mirth.  
But, while they laugh, from shore to shore,  
    From sea to moaning sea,  
*Eloi, Eloi*, goes up once more  
    *Lama sabachthani!*  
The heavens are like a scroll unfurled,  
    The writing flames above—  
This is the King of all the world  
    Upon his Cross of love!"

#### KEEPING THE FAITH.

In coming to my closing appeal, I need first to deal with the pessimistic carpers.

They tell us that we are living in an uninspiring age and it is naive to expect anyone to keep the spirit of faith.

They tell us that the Business World is a world of shoddy thinks and tricky men.

They tell us that the Political World is still worse—a place of graft and oligarchy.

They tell us that the Social World is still worse—a dubious place—"the House of Mirth"—where manners are artificial and morals are lax.

Then, they judge the "New Woman", and declare that she is lacking in refinement, and even more lacking in ethical regards.

Then, they take up the Modern Young Man, and assert that he is a dawdler, a subject of chronic ennui, without endurance, without courage and without chivalry.

Then, to cap the climax, these fault-finders insist that no longer is there any poetry, no longer any wonder in life; for science has now banished all mystery and reduced all events to expected occurrence under the rigid law of uniformity.

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What, then, can we say to these things? We can say this: These pessimistic conclusions are only half truths, and often our half truths become whole falsehoods.

In the Business World, there are shoddy things and dishonest men, but there are also things which are not shoddy and men who are not dishonest. I myself know business men upon whose bare word I would stake my life. We hear much about the "Siegel exposure"; but, over against that putrid affair, we may well remember the splendid business career of Benjamin Altman.

In the Political World, we are, at one and the same time, finishing one chapter and beginning another; and everything depends upon which chapter one is reading. Many of us (and not in any one political party alone), are reading the New Chapter, and we are full of hope,—as full of hope as our Drew dogwood trees, this May morning, are full of blossoms.

As to the Social World, which Edith Wharton treats with merciless genius, I myself know nothing about it, at first hand; but it has come to my mind, now and again, that Helen Gould was born *there*, and was brought up *there*; and to me it does not seem likely that she could have been produced in a world wholly given over to artificial ways and vitiating principles.

As to the "New Woman", I confess at once that she is an unsolved enigma. When she has the whim, she dresses in the most astounding violation of aesthetic sanity; and yet, at other times and in other ways, she evinces a rare appreciation of the beautiful and sublime. With unbelievable savagery, she pours chemicals into a mail box \* actually plotting to destroy the eyesight of any chance person using the box; and yet in all the noble philanthropies, she manifests the kindness and patience and self-sacrifice of the very saints.

As to the Modern Young Man, I am unable to discover a distinct type, but I will give you two specimens: one is a soft, spineless creature, spending money which he never earned, and cultivating nameless vices which he never inherited. The other is a young giant, with a football record, his college course barely behind him, and many doors flying open before his eager feet. But, without hesitation, he flings away his coat and jumps into

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\*One of the many inhuman expressions of lawless ferocity reported from England in recent days. For some of these "militant deeds", I can find no defense whatever save in the predicate of insanity.

the rushing water and gives up his life in a hopeless effort to rescue an unknown servant girl. Godfrey the Crusader is dead, but chivalry is yet alive!

As to Science, merely a suggestive word. Some mysteries have been banished, but other mysteries have come. We have published many scientific tomes and—*exchanged mysteries*—that is all! Earth is crammed with wonders, *now*. “And every common bush afire with God.”

Concerning the matter of uniformity, the case is usually over-stated. The laws of phenomenal change are too deep and too complex to be thoroughly mastered by Science. Even the Weather Bureau can be taken too seriously! Indeed, all sorts of sudden and strange things take place in Nature. As Bishop McConnell says: “Many events seem shot at us from a gun, the gun in the hands of a rather irresponsible sportsman at that.”

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Suppose, though, we grant the estimate of the faultfinders, suppose we admit that the age is uninspiring, and no uplift can come to anyone from the present scene—What of it? Many a man has lived above his immediate scene. Many a man has believed beyond his age, many a man has stood immovably against his age. A man, a real man, is more than an age. A man does not belong to time, anyway, he belongs to eternity. As Robert Browning’s “Grammarian” said:

“What’s time? Leave *NOW* for dogs and apes!  
Man has *FOREVER*.”

But, brethren, I am not asking you to be optimists, bare volitional optimists—like Emerson and Whitman—I am asking you to be *Christian* optimists, which is a very different matter. I am asking you to interpret life through Christian Belief; I am asking you to select facts and to place facts and to emphasize facts and to draw your last inference from facts, all in harmony with a Christian vision, of verities out of ken; I am asking you to believe in men, in their inherent possibilities, not because they act thus and so, but simply because our Lord died for them; I am

asking you to be sure in Christ Jesus that God Almighty has not forsaken His children, even when His path is swallowed up in "great waters" and His footsteps are "not known."

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It is, however, not enough to keep the Christian Optimism, even if in isolation it could be kept—you must keep the Christian Faith *in its entirety*.

For one thing, that peculiar personal venture, by which we lay hold of Christ and His death, must be a continual intentional bearing. When will we ever learn that our salvation is *not static, but energetic*. We are not saved by ancient history, salvation is a present dynamic occurrence. Our past relation to Jesus and His Cross is an exceedingly important thing, and in several ways; but the main thing is our actual relation to-day.

Then, the Christian Creed (the Christian Faith as our Lord's Deity, and the Atonement, and the Redemption Miracles) must be kept, not merely in the head, and not merely by the will, but also in the heart. We are to believe not barely *about* these things, but also *in these things*. They should be to us tonic inspirations. We need to have, day by day, the mighty *creedal emotions*. We need to feel that we are dealing with stupendous matters, just as we feel when we climb the mountains, or sail the ocean, or watch the Milky Way in its sublime sweep across the night-sky. The Christian Creed must vitalize our prayer, and contribute substance and quality to our devotional meditation. We must love the Creed, with a romantic spiritual passion, even as a noble man loves his wife or his mother.

Last of all, there is a practical use of the Creed as a *creative test*. In business, in politics, and in other practical affairs, the Creed cannot, of course, furnish any clew for immediate action or definite opinion; but it will often create a testing ideal, and indirectly protect us from unchristian decisions and tendencies.

And when we ourselves come to the various tribulations of life—change, and sickness, and pain, and sorrow, and those secret woes which we name only in the Saviour's ear—we must keep very close to the Christian Creed. Our experience under the

*tribulum*, and “under the feet of the oxen”, must be made to come to terms with the meaning and majesty of our Creed. As St. Paul said to the Corinthians, so we will say to our entire congregation of ills: “I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

My sermon, in its entire intention, is done; but I have a longing to take, before stopping, one last look at my own hero —“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus.”

Paul’s time to go has come, but he himself is full of joy. His very words seem to sing with victory. His hard fight is over. He has kept the Faith. And his reward in Christ Jesus is glorious before his face.

Never can I read Paul’s paean of triumph without recalling a certain picture which once captured my heart. It is a painting by J. M. W. Turner, and it hangs in the “Turner Room” of the London “National Gallery.” It is called “The Old Temeraire”, or, sometimes, “The Old Fighting Temeraire.” A steam tug, small, black, and belching, is towing into a quiet harbor, for ultimate breaking up, a gigantic man-of-war, of the Nelson or Collingwood type, a three-decker, having three cloud-piercing masts. (Ah! you must forgive me, but one would give something to have seen that ship in action at Trafalgar!) The painter has made the sky behind the ship sinister; such a sky as we have, in Summer, near the end of a big storm, a few bright streaks here and yonder, but the cloud masses still dour while the thunder is still muttering. The great ship itself the painter has transfigured. Not a gun is in sight; and the slender masts rise up as pallid and ethereal as ghost-sentinels.

But did you ever see one of Turner’s sunsets? Well, with one of *his* sunsets, Turner has filled that Western sky so full that the sunset has actually spilled over, like red wine, into the harbor. And the water is even as gorgeous as the sky.

And so “The Old Temeraire”, making for the final harbor, has passed beyond the sinister sky, and is just about to be swallowed up in Glory!



